

# Assessing ESOL Students

*Working together, ESOL and special education teachers pose six questions that probe the diverse factors that can contribute to students' learning problems.*

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and Leslie Laud**



**T**hameeza, a 6th grade English for speakers of other languages (ESOL) student, had difficulty with phonemic awareness, memory, and cognitive organization. According to her parents, she had experienced trauma in her war-torn native country; however, counseling alone had not helped her make academic progress. After completing a profile of Thameeza's learning environment, we discovered interacting factors that impeded her progress; in addition, testing revealed a learning disability. We also found that

the traditional rote methods of her former learning environment differed significantly from our school's student-centered approach. Thameeza, therefore, needed a plan that would address many factors, each in different ways. Her case underscores the importance of considering diverse life factors rather than just test scores—no matter how valid the test scores are.

This holistic profile of Thameeza's learning difficulties grew from a collaboration between special educators and ESOL teachers in a multilingual, diverse school in New York City. The United Nations International School, founded with the mission to teach the children of parents who work at the United Nations and those of

other international families, serves approximately 1,400 students from 130 countries. As two ESOL teachers and the learning specialist, we began a dialogue about how to work together to meet the needs of ESOL students with learning differences. We asked ourselves,

■ At what point should we refer to special services those ESOL students who are experiencing unusual difficulties?

■ How does a resource teacher distinguish ESOL issues from learning problems?

We wanted to avoid referring too many or too few students, a common error (Gersten & Woodward, 1994). We quickly discovered, however, common characteristics in our students that might make us think that an ESOL issue was a learning difference or vice versa. We created and field-tested a profile format to gather information on the whole child's experience, considering as many factors as possible in the child's entire learning environment, as Jim Cummins (1991) recommends. To identify explanations other than a learning disability for the discrepancy between an ESOL student's ability and performance, we developed a holistic profile that asks six questions about the student's learning environment. The profile questions follow, with insights gleaned from our students.

## **What Have Formal Tests Found?**

Formal testing of some ESOL students has proven inadequate (Cummins, 1984), and Mohammed's case exemplifies this. He was referred for testing because, despite great effort and focus, he could not read the simplest text; his writing was incomprehensible; and his motor skills were exceptionally slow. His teachers and peers believed he was

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a slow learner, yet his command of oral language showed greater understanding and clarity. This discrepancy in written and oral language is common as students learn English, yet it can also signal a learning disability. Because learning disabilities usually appear in a student's native language as well as the second language, we tested Mohammed in his native language. Results showed low performance levels but no discrepancy that might suggest a learning disability.

Problems in translating the test, however, limited the validity of its findings. For example, one test asked questions about popular culture that the student was not familiar with. When we followed up with tests that had directions in basic English, we found considerably higher performance levels. The additional testing showed strengths that we were not recognizing. Mohammed's

### How does a resource teacher distinguish ESOL issues from learning problems?

success with a social studies oral report substantiated that his abstract reasoning skills outpaced other performance. Rather than lowering academic standards, we offered Mohammed a more structured learning environment with visual organizers such as semantic maps, as Russell Gersten (1999) recommends for a learner with reading and writing difficulties. We also used a more multimodal approach, including graphs, visual cues, and kinesthetic activities, recommended by Alejandro Brice and Celeste Roseberry-McKibbin (1999). Although it can be tempting with students like Mohammed to attribute

slow progress to a single cause, the profile reminds us to consider many factors in developing multifaceted approaches to learning.

### What Is the Student's Developmental History?

Sergei was a student with fluent speaking and listening comprehension skills, but his reading and writing did not match this oral competence. He was a reluctant reader with serious decoding and spelling difficulties, and he was particularly confused by the many irregularities in English. His teachers noted his short attention span, yet his parents believed that he was just lazy. As tensions increased, his mother remembered his persistent difficulties with learning to read in his native language, even though it is an extremely phonetic language. Testing revealed a learning disability.

In contrast to Sergei, some students

## FIGURE 1

### Information for a Student Profile

Contact parents, teachers, psychologists, and pediatricians and review records for information about a student experiencing difficulty with learning English.

#### Testing information

Psychoeducational testing in native and second language  
Standardized test scores  
Medical records (hearing, sight, etc.)

#### Developmental history

Speaking, reading, writing, motor skills  
Sibling/parent history of learning disabilities

#### Psychological issues

Traumas  
Stability in care/family  
Prior learning experiences  
Length of time in second-language country

#### Language/Cultural experience

Prior English learning experience/education system  
History of study with tutors  
Bias (toward or from second-language country)  
Languages spoken at home or by caretakers  
Languages spoken by social peer groups  
Native language's similarity to English

#### Learning disability signals

##### A. Language-based

Dysfluent speech/writing  
Disorganized speech/writing  
Associative language learning

##### B. Nonverbal characteristics

Ability to focus  
Processing lag  
Memory  
Sustained concentration levels  
Abstract nonverbal reasoning  
Organization (time and materials)  
Work and study habits across subjects  
Behavior in classroom (avoidant/cooperative)

##### C. Visual/auditory processing

Directionality (confuses letter order)  
Phonemic/phonological difficulties  
(segment, rhyme, play with sounds)  
Speed of discerning subtle visual differences

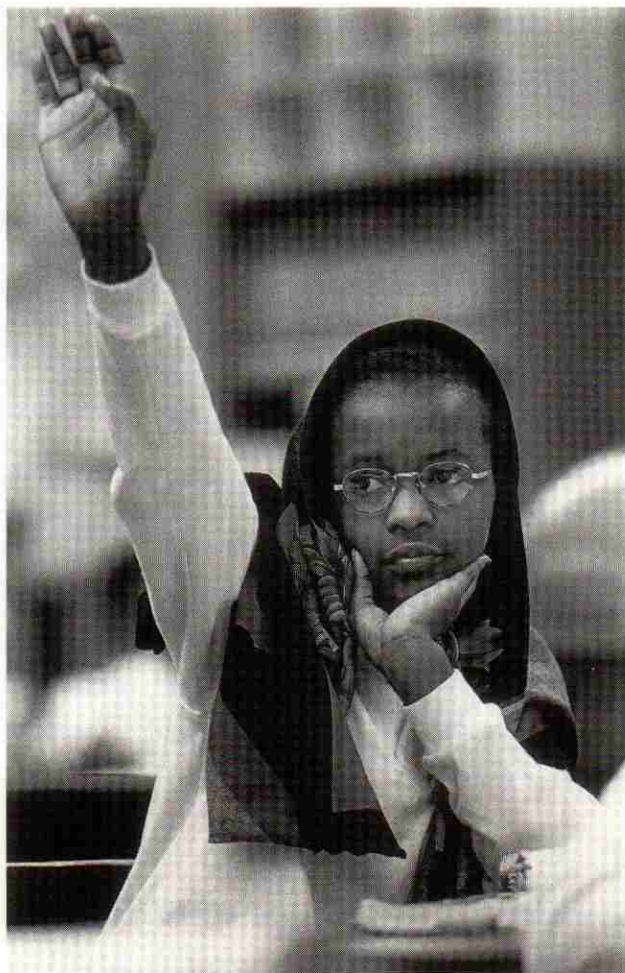


have no past history of learning problems in their native language; their problems surface in the second language, particularly if the language is less rule-governed (Abramson, 2001). For example, within the first few weeks of his arrival at our school, Johan's inability to spell or copy words correctly became obvious, despite his solid communicative English skills. He did not know his right from left, had difficulty with spatial awareness, was inattentive, and regularly focused on irrelevant details. Johan had been a good student in his native language, Norwegian, which—like Spanish or Italian—is far more rule-governed than English, allowing Johan to compensate more easily for his learning differences. Having been exposed to English for only one year before his arrival, Johan continued to receive some ESOL support, but he also received direct instruction in phonetic awareness and spelling. With this altered approach, he made rapid progress and has since been mainstreamed.

### Are Psychological Issues Impeding Progress?

Juanita struggled with academic subjects and showed classic signs of a learning disability: disorganization, careless work, and difficulties with decoding despite being in 7th grade. When we used the profile to explore her learning difficulties, however, we found that they did not come from ESOL or learning-disability issues: She had lost her primary caretaker three times in the first three years of her life, which disrupted her attachment process. We referred her for counseling, and she is making notable progress without any academic intervention.

Similarly, we asked ourselves why



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Mercedes, who had attended an English immersion school in her non-English-speaking country. She had rejected her native language and had sought friends who spoke English. In spite of extensive exposure to the language, she showed incomplete mastery of written English and a fragmented vocabulary. Her refusal to acknowledge that she needed to improve made her unreceptive to learning English in the ESOL context. We suggested that she enroll in a language class for speakers of her native language to solidify her native language skills. Mastery of the native language can transfer to and support second language competence (Cummins, 1984); in this case, it could also help Mercedes gain appreciation for her culture and language. A positive identity in her own language community might also diminish Mercedes's need to pretend that she had mastered English, we hypothesized. Since changing our approach,

Mercedes has progressed academically and gained self-esteem.

Thandi was not able to pass the ESOL exit exam after four years of intensive instruction—when most students in our school leave the program after two years, or three at the most. Thandi had difficulty understanding and completing assignments. She was disorganized and forgetful and did not complete homework. Her standardized test scores were within the normal range, and she had strong oral and social skills. But her family history showed rupture and abandonment, suggesting a need for counseling. With these interventions, she left the ESOL program and has made solid progress.

### What Educational Experiences Did the Student Have?

Previous English learning experience may actually hinder developing academic fluency, as in the case of

### What Is the Student's Cultural Experience?

In contrast to Mercedes, Jisoo rejected learning English. Her written sentences were always brief; she made persistent errors in the use of articles, prepositions, and the past tense; and she read only the simplest books. By contrast, she spoke her native language well and could read and write fluently at grade level. She enjoyed constructing complicated paper sculptures requiring concentration, memory, and abstract reasoning—showing that the typical nonverbal indicators of a learning disability were absent. Yet, she had difficulty focusing during listening or writing tasks, even in the ESOL context. She did not complete assigned home-



work, producing instead such uncalled-for assignments as hand-copied story-books. These types of assignments were given at an outside English school run by one of her relatives, where the emphasis was on rote learning.

Jisoo's family criticized the progressive teaching styles used in our school, and Jisoo was not receptive to them. The conflict of values between her family and the school seemed to impede her learning. She needed continued ESOL support, we decided, as well as some validation of her own culture in school. A turning point in Jisoo's progress came when the class studied a storybook that portrayed her country in a positive light. With the extra ESOL support and home-culture validation, Jisoo became more positive in class and made new friends from cultures different from her own.

### Does the Student Show Signs of a Learning Disability?

Our profile lists characteristics that may signal a learning disability (see fig. 1). Detailed lists of how these characteristics might look in ESOL students are available (Root, 1994; Shewcraft & Witkop, 1998). If a student has a learning disability, the difficulties are intrinsic to the learner, who will need individualized support, and the difficulties will persist for a long time (Hamayan, 2000). If an ESOL student does not have a learning disability, the problems are extrinsic and do not persist; the student will need time to develop further language proficiency.

For example, Anum appeared to have a learning disability. She made many errors and progressed slowly—but only because of the enormous differences between her native language and English. Her difficulties were short-lived and extrinsic to her as a learner; all she needed was an extra year of ESOL.

Hwang's grammatical errors might have signaled either ESOL issues or a learning disability. He appeared disorganized and had great difficulty focusing; his work seemed careless and minimal.

**Rather than lowering academic standards, we offered Mohammed a more structured learning environment with visual organizers such as semantic maps.**

He still confused verb tenses and articles. Hwang's native language differed so much from English that one might predict he would have persistent difficulty mastering English. Unlike Anum, however, he had also received intensive tutoring for several years and had lived here for 10 years. Only after formally testing him and reviewing his entire profile did it become clear to us that he probably did have a learning difficulty; his assessment revealed an expressive writing disability. Hwang still struggles, but his teachers help him by structuring his instruction.

### A Team Approach

As we return to our opening questions, we realize that the answers are as multifaceted and diverse as our students—and the answers are best sought through cooperative efforts. Many researchers recommend greater collaboration between ESOL teachers and special educators (Board of Education of the City of New York, 1994; Brice & Roseberry-McKibbin, 1999; Rosa-Lugo & Fradd, 2000). Working as a team, we have developed a concrete profile format that has proven invaluable in how we understand our students—and we have made leaps in our professional knowledge and understanding of one another's fields. ■

*Authors' note:* Sandra Fradd, Pat Nordquist, and Jerome Dutilloy contributed to this article.

<sup>1</sup>All students' names have been changed.

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